
Faith, Science, and Social Justice in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* Triptych

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In 2010, the third time I taught my English department course on the Bible, I inserted a break between the testaments for reading a novel. In previous versions of the course, I had seen direct encounters with Scripture and basic discoveries about its origins powerfully challenge my students' previous assumptions. Some had never read the Bible for themselves; others had only encountered widely known, relatively tame selections. Almost none of my Midwestern university students had thought about the Bible as a library that developed in particular times or places. There were flood narratives before the Noah version? Abraham almost did what to his son? The Bible talks about rape and slavery? And that was just Genesis and Exodus: as the conversations moved from the Law to the Prophets and then to the Writings, the sense of estrangement was for some overwhelming.

Over the last several times I have taught the course, then, Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* has provided some needed breathing room. Her novel lets us pause to ponder the discoveries so far, bringing us closer to the present with an unusual combination of credibility about earthly goodness, and honesty about human wretchedness. Narrated as a letter to a pastor's seven-year-old son that is intended to be read years after its composer's death, *Gilead* is an extended meditation on the nature of grace. Many key scenes occur between men for whom the biblical library and theological tomes are intensely familiar: John Ames, our narrator; his lifelong friend and fellow pastor "old"

Boughton, whose first name is not provided; and the narrator's namesake, John Ames ("Jack") Boughton, the "young" Boughton whose indiscretions create much of the novel's background drama. Robinson's subtlety in evoking these relationships deserves the many words it has inspired. Here, though, I will focus on Ames's relationship with the wife of his old age, Lila, who transforms his vision just as much as does Jack.

A casual glance at *Gilead* may misapprehend it as idyllic pastoral, a work of literary nostalgia for a postwar America long disappeared except in the nation's most rural outposts. Readers who give it only a couple dozen pages may complain of its measured pace and the narrator's seeming commonplaceness, missing that Robinson's disinterest in spectacle, in plot for plot's sake, is strategic. In *Gilead* (2004), its "simul-quel" *Home* (2008), and then a prequel, *Lila* (2014), she adopts a narrative voice that is quite distinct from Flannery O'Connor's short-story "shouts" for the "hard of hearing." Still, Robinson shares that Catholic master's no-nonsense assertiveness, an earnestness that grips her reader only slowly, but then inescapably. Indeed this literary mode, which Sharon Jebb Smith calls "seriousness" without "sullenness," is the perfect formal expression of John Ames's assertion that it is useless to defend faith.¹ As he notes in *Gilead*, "Creating proofs from experience of any sort is like building a ladder to the moon . . . [proofs] are never sufficient to the question, and they're always a little impertinent, I think, because they claim for God a place within our conceptual grasp." Instead,



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he and Robinson invite us into Coleridge's slowly unfolding view of Christianity as "a life, not a doctrine" (179).² Readers of the Gilead trilogy must sit still, be quiet. We must pause over the goodness of creation; eventually, we may tremble with it.

This marriage of tranquility and forcefulness may be the reason why I never felt a need to try to *explain* Robinson's work in print—perhaps it would have felt too much like a defense. In part, that's what we literary critics do: we read a lot, then offer

road maps by which others may find their own nuggets of insight. Inevitably, that process involves making aesthetic evaluations and claims about the significance of specific texts. Upon closing *Gilead* for the first time in January 2006, though, I wrote the following inside the back cover: "Very *clean*, in the best sense. Faulkner, without pretension." I had little to add. It took this special issue to change that, now that the triptych is complete and I can juxtapose it with many of Robinson's essays and several more semesters of classroom conversations. Focusing especially on *Lila*, I want to say something now about these works' implications for how we understand science in relation to faith.

By reflecting on how Robinson's writing describes creation and pursues epistemology, I will probe what I take to be two of her most longstanding concerns: not only the irony by which religious absolutism and its scientific mirror-image mutually degrade the trust on which human society depends, but also the enormous hope that lies in reuniting theological humility and scientific rigour with each other and with socioeconomic generosity. In *Lila*, we have a character with every reason to abandon

hope, certainly in other human beings if not also in God. Her lack of educational background makes her an unlikely herald for scientific and theological coherence, yet the new life she finds with John Ames incarnates that possibility. Through these characters' converging narratives, Robinson fleshes out her essays' insistence that true faith, knowledge, and social justice must be deeply interwoven, even if that interdependence is rarely obvious from a distance.

Readers of *Gilead* know that one rainy Sunday, not many years after the end of World War 2, a woman walks into a rural southwest Iowa church and transforms the latter days of Reverend John Ames. The author of enough sermons to fill several hundred volumes, he is devoted to his Congregationalist flock as well as to a lifelong friendship with the town's Presbyterian minister. A widower for decades, Ames lost his wife in childbirth and daughter soon thereafter. But he finds new joy and purpose in befriending Lila, a much younger woman whose rough background and incapacity for small talk eventually make her something far from a stereotypical pastor's wife. Readers journey with Ames through his letters to his son, the "begats" he expects the young man to read years hence. These epistles not only outline his relationship with the previously homeless woman, but edge toward the novel's central dilemma: Ames's choice about how much to share with his young family about the recently returned Jack Boughton, the wayward son of his lifelong friend. We learn that twenty years earlier, Ames's namesake had taken advantage of an impoverished underage woman and then abandoned any responsibility for the child, who died as a toddler. Moreover, by the end of *Gilead*, Jack tells Ames of his recent devotion to an African American woman from Tennessee and their five- or six-year-old son, despite her family's ongoing distrust. Put succinctly, the past and present improprieties of this prodigal son severely test, but ultimately expand, our narrator's capacity for forgiveness.

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After *Home* re-narrates Jack's return—this time from the richly contrasting perspective of his sister Glory, who has returned to live with their father—Robinson's exploration of Lila's past in the third novel is much starker, yet just as tightly interwoven. Like Jack, Lila has rarely known any measure of domestic tranquility. She has been a nomad since childhood: we learn that prior to an abandoned shack on the edge of Gilead, her home was a whorehouse in St. Louis; before that, she lived with a group of itinerant workers, her main caregiver having rescued her from a situation of absolute neglect during her earliest years. Utilizing the third person, Robinson makes her portrayal of this hesitant companion of Ames's old age even more intimate, even more direct than Ames's letters in *Gilead*. With intertextual roots extending to many biblical texts, *Lila* recalls the humour of Abraham and Sarah's unexpected fertility, the loyalty and forthrightness of Ruth, the lamentations of Job (and the all-transforming divine response), and the immediacy of Mark. Lila's perspective makes the creation even more viscerally *alive* and *ongoing* than it appears in the spiritual autobiography of *Gilead*, with human beings bound up in something still beyond their comprehension. Robinson's vision is neither dualist nor monist; it is closer to panentheism than pantheism. Indeed when read in tandem with Robinson's essays, the many-faceted companionship of John Ames and Lila represents an appeal to consilience between the ordinary and the sacred, between the domains of science and theology.

On the surface, this could seem a surprising interpretation of a trilogy that never once uses the word "science" in its combined eight-hundred-plus pages, and I readily admit that making this case might seem more difficult without Robinson's many impassioned, nuanced essays about evolution, neuroscience, and physics. Yet the nature of creation and the interpretive posture by which we approach it are foundational themes for the entire Gilead trilogy. Think, for instance, of the first nov-

el's attention to the adverb *just*. Early in his epistolary experiment, John Ames realizes,

In writing this, I notice the care it costs me not to use certain words more than I ought to. I am thinking about the word "just." I almost wish I could have written that the sun just *shone* and the tree just *glistened*, and the water just *poured* out of it and the girl just *laughed*—when it's used that way it does indicate a stress on the word that follows it, and also a particular pitch of the voice. People talk that way when they want to call attention to a thing existing in excess of itself, so to speak, a sort of purity or lavishness, at any rate something ordinary in kind but exceptional in degree. (28, emphasis original)

"A thing existing in excess of itself . . . something ordinary in kind but exceptional in degree": Robinson distinguishes between the mundane and the sacred, but refuses to prioritize one above the other. Here the miraculous emerges *through* the material, not despite it. What Ames acknowledges with his hesitation over the term *just* is that language is incapable of capturing the exceptionality of any given moment. There is what is apparent before us, and there is something more, yet that excess is not "higher," nor is it the "form" of the physical thing. The limitation Robinson identifies is not in the phenomenon, but in the capacities of even the most poetic words to express it: "There is something real signified by that word 'just' that proper language won't acknowledge" (28). Thus Ames must limit his indulgence in this adverb, the overuse of which would ironically counteract its meaning.

This is a comment about the nature of beauty and of language, but it also is suggestive of Robinson's approach to science and knowledge. In Robinson's essays, she is equally concerned with some scientists' adverbial abuses. In "Humanism," the first piece in *The Givenness of Things* (2015), she

expresses a profound concern with the “strangely linear and reductive” claims of certain scientific and social scientific disciplines, most notably neuroscience and “a dominant school of economics” (i.e., neo-liberalism). Challenging the reductionist habits of cognitive science, she laments the assumption that

the adverbs “simply” and “merely” can exorcise the mystifications that have always surrounded the operations of the mind/brain, exposing the machinery that in fact produces emotion, behavior, and all the rest. . . . The amazing complexity of the individual cell is being pored over in other regions of science, while neuroscience persists in declaring the brain, this same complexity vastly compounded, an essentially simple thing.³

In some ways echoing psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist, Robinson notes one other problem with adverbs like *just*, *simply*, and *merely*.⁴ If Christians rely on them too often as a testimonial crutch and thereby render themselves blind to the particular materiality of creation, including the neurochemical components of human cognition, scientists can foster another misconception by using these terms in a reductionist mode. Instead of saying a sunset is *just* glorious, the ideology Robinson criticizes might say the resulting colours are *just* the result of there being more air molecules to look through when the sun is low on the horizon, so that short-wavelength colours like blue and purple are scattered and oranges and reds are more pronounced. This explanation is entirely factual, but it can prove equally as constricting as pious clichés. In both their religious and scientific misapplications, *simply*, *merely*, and *just* may end up explaining *away* the immediate. Ironically, they become excuses to *not* pay attention.

Robinson’s slow-simmering fiction cultivates a very different mindset, a readily self-discipline that might even be called

prayerful. The Gilead trilogy indicates how knowledge—whether outwardly religious or scientific—can only be meaningful insofar as it is grounded in presence, in embodied relationship. In *Lila*, consider how the eponymous main character and her aged pastor-friend begin to establish trust. Among other things, they discuss Lila’s lack of a home, that phenomenon on which Glory depends in the second novel—a place of rootedness, of profound connection between body, soul, and surroundings. We learn, for instance, that Lila “had never been home in all the years of her life. She wouldn’t know how to begin. But the shade of the cottonwoods and the shimmer of their leaves and the trill of the cicadas were comfort for her.” This sentence about cottonwoods and cicadas is no mere flourish, as Lila’s story goes on to appeal to our senses even more broadly: “The pasture smell. Elderberries grew in the ditches by the road, and they picked them and ate them as they walked. Sometimes it was dark when they turned back toward Gilead. Once, he noticed a bush glimmering with fireflies. He stepped into the ditch and touched it, and fireflies rose out of it in a cloud of light” (107). This is how Robinson evokes the glory of creation in the Gilead novels, not so much through arguments about doctrine as via rich demonstration, through moments of uncalculated encounter. It is a pattern that deserves lengthier elucidation, but here I will note only that for attentive readers, it offers a refreshingly sacramental vision of holiness in the ordinary.⁵

Such scenes find Robinson presenting rich, three-dimensional affirmations of human subjectivity. Through the unique narrational strategies of the three novels, readers come to know John Ames from multiple directions. *Gilead*’s narrator ponders creation in his own voice: the electricity of touching a baby’s brow with the water of baptism, the peacefulness of a baseball flying between two generations as dusk approaches. *Home* fleshes out that portrayal from greater distance, rendering the gaps between Ames’s intentions and their

sometimes painful effects, as when his extemporaneous sermonizing seems to target Jack's past. *Lila* then steps back in time, reintroducing Ames through the eyes of a woman who struggled to trust him, then shocked herself by proposing marriage. Readers begin to sense how the humility of the old man's letters might be less evident from other perspectives, and how difficult it is to resist the judgmental spirit he decries yet sometimes fails to avoid.⁶ By the time *Lila* reexamines this twentieth-century Moses, his burning bushes and his regrets at being unable to fully enter the promised land with his family appear in a new light. We grow conscious of Ames's frailty in ways hidden by his letters in *Gilead*. Holding the volumes together, we see that for all of Ames's and Lila's admirable traits, neither merits divine address. It is their *relationship*, what they create together, that yields the fireflies. Without Lila, Ames would never have stepped again into that ditch of creation, nor would there have been any witness to the resulting grandeur.

Such moments suggest how Robinson's novelistic treatments of creation—and human knowledge thereof—draw closer to pantheism than to pantheism, how they evade both dualism and monism. In her essays, of course, Robinson is deeply critical of easy religious-scientific binaries. In "Freedom of Thought" (2012), for example, she observes, "There are those who feel that the spiritual is diminished or denied when it is associated with the physical. I am not among them." Instead, she quotes Paul's exhortation to the Romans to find God "in the things that have been made." This does not mean worshiping those things themselves, nor does it devalue them as weak imitations of higher forms. Rather, Robinson espouses Calvin's position that "nature is a shining garment in which God is revealed and concealed."⁷ She is simultaneously cognizant that studying the material world and following where the data lead can be a major step toward overcoming dualism, toward revealing glory in the mundane, and that left to itself, materialism can lead

to monism, which cannot accept that some truths may remain concealed from our most powerful telescopes and microscopes. Thus Robinson interrogates reductionism and its cousin militant atheism, ideologies in which the material can never be allowed to point beyond itself. This makes her both a hard-hitting critic of scientism, or *metaphysical* naturalism, and an enthusiastic cheerleader for science itself, or *methodological* naturalism. She is as much a champion of science's capacity to illuminate the cosmos as she is an opponent of scientism's attempts to toss out our instinct toward wonder.⁸

For some Christians, rejecting the latter habit seems the most urgent task. Thus they might emphasize Robinson's vocal resistance to the vacuous immorality of Social Darwinism. Though she has never objected to the foundational biological paradigm of evolution, her nonfiction essays have regularly rejected its ideological perversions. In her essay on "Darwinism" in *The Death of Adam* (1998), for example, she laments the oppositional paradigm by which "the Creationist position has long been owned by the Religious Right, and the Darwinist position by the Irreligious Right," when in fact "the differences between these camps are intractable because they are meaningless."⁹ Those who wrestle with that essay in its full complexity will not confuse her for an opponent of contemporary biology, but over time, the target in her crosshairs has grown progressively less vulnerable to misinterpretation. Recently, she renamed the reductionist ideology that she is confronting "neo-Darwinism,"¹⁰ making her position even less mistakable: the problem is not biology, but its conscription by the culture wars. For this reason, I

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would emphasize that it is just as important to ponder Robinson's enthusiasm for science as her rejection of scientism.¹¹

Indeed a major reason that Robinson's novels are so concerned with voicing creation's praise and with exploring epistemology is her deep love of science for its own sake. This is a writer who bemoans how many "religious people feel fiercely threatened by science," who exhorts, "O ye of little faith. Let them subscribe to *Scientific American* for a year and then tell me if their sense of the grandeur of God is not greatly enlarged by what they have learned from it."¹² For Robinson, as for a poet like Gerard Manley Hopkins, the physical world is not a window onto some other, separate realm, but a participant in that reality, a stage onto which it is continually breaking. Thus she passionately repudiates any ideology that pretends "everything is explicable, that whatever has not been explained will be explained—and, furthermore, by [scientists'] methods. They have seen to the heart of it all. So mystery is banished—mystery being no more than whatever their methods cannot capture yet."¹³ Again, this is the adverbial problem shared by fundamentalism and militant atheism: whether one assumes that spiritual phenomena are *only* physical realities that have not yet been unmasked, or that the material world is *only* a smokescreen hiding a higher realm, the effect is to assume a "God of the gaps" and to draw attention away from the far-reaching mystery and wonder of existence. For Robinson, science and religion are equally dependent on curiosity—and equally poisoned by hubris.

Only upon reading *Lila*, however, did I fully grasp the other major reason that drives Robinson's deep-seated objections to scientism—one that is less commonly considered, or that can seem unrelated. At least since her "Darwinism" essay in 1998, Robinson has been intimating that our culture's misguided science-versus-religion binary has consequences reaching far beyond philosophy and theology, repercussions that include the most commonplace transactions of daily life:

People who insist that the sacredness of Scripture depends on belief in creation in a literal six days seem never to insist on a literal reading of "to him who asks, give" or "sell what you have and give the money to the poor." In fact, their politics and economics align themselves quite precisely with those of their adversaries, who yearn to disburden themselves of the weak, and to unshackle the great creative forces of competition. The defenders of "religion" have made religion seem foolish while rendering it mute in the face of a prolonged and highly effective assault on the poor. The defenders of "science" have imputed objectivity and rigor to an account of reality whose origins and consequences are indisputably economic, social, and political.¹⁴

In other words, Robinson does not criticize fundamentalism in her "Darwinism" essay because it is too theological, nor scientism because it is too scientific. She rejects religious absolutism because it is not religious *enough*, just as she spurns the scientific variety for being insufficiently *scientific*. Her point is that scientism and fundamentalism rely upon disturbingly congruent political and economic ideologies, and it matters little if one's outward garb is holy and the other's is profane. If an earlier Robinson seemed more critical of scientism than fundamentalism, it was only because "in the case of religion, the best and the worst of it have been discredited together," while "in the case of science, neither has been discredited."¹⁵ She sought to balance that equation, and it is increasingly apparent that she is challenging the socioeconomic assumptions of Christians and non-Christians alike.

Like Robinson's intensifying focus on her neo-Darwinist target, this attention to the neoliberal systems that create wealth and poverty in America has grown more acute

with time.¹⁶ In her latest book of essays, she observes how “the spirit of the times is one of joyless urgency, many of us preparing ourselves and our children to be means to inscrutable ends that are utterly not our own,” ends that amount to “economic servitude.” Perhaps surprisingly to those who think they know where this lament is headed, though, her response is far from Luddite. Rather than lumping new tools for seeing deeply into the cosmos or the genome into her criticism of global corporatism, Robinson proposes that “the antidote to our gloom is to be found in contemporary science,” even going so far as to recommend special attention to “the phenomenon called quantum entanglement.”¹⁷ This from the same woman whose trilogy is set predominantly in 1950s small-town Iowa, a world in which baseball on television represents the height of technological achievement.

Rather than representing escapist nostalgia, Robinson's alignment of historical fiction and scientific enthusiasm is fitting. *Lila's* culminating role within the Gilead triptych is to display how fully a healthy regard for creation and a nuanced epistemology require both theological and scientific humility, a posture that in turn will necessarily prize racial and socioeconomic justice.¹⁸ No character in Robinson's writing embodies personal destitution so fully as Lila—not even Jack Boughton—and for that very reason, no character is so deserving of our attention. There is nothing sentimental or condescending about Robinson's portrait of Lila's self-education, which centres upon copying letters she receives from Ames and the Bible she lifted from his church. Robinson uses these moments to great effect, letting us sit beside Lila as she translates the most fantastic of Ezekial's images into more comprehensible terms:

She wrote, *And I looked, and behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, a great cloud, with a fire infolding itself, and a brightness round about it, and out of the midst thereof as it were glowing metal, out*

of the midst of the fire. Well, that could have been a prairie fire in a drought year. She had never seen one, but she had heard stories. *And out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a man. And every one had four faces, and every one of them had four wings.* Well, she didn't know what to make of that. A dream somebody had, and he wrote it down, and it ended up in this book. (68)

There is no superfluous piety here. We *are* Lila, with all of her honest bewilderment. Her guilelessness takes us back to the most basic questions: “She thought, What would I pray for, if I thought there was any point in it? Well, I guess the first thing would have to be that there was some kind of point in it” (61–62). Robinson invites us to see the world anew—starting not with a Cartesian rationalization of the self, but with an openly subjective appeal to the hope of ultimate purpose. By implication, if science or theology is to yield any valuable knowledge, it will depend upon intuitive leaps, a willingness to risk relationship in full awareness that one may be betrayed. That is, the most profound knowledge depends on both written and unwritten social contracts, including a shared commitment to second chances and freedom of opportunity. Lacking that vision, there is no point speculating about either four-faced creatures or quantum entanglement.

Of course one could dismiss *Lila* with the same knee-jerk reaction that labels *Gilead* as nostalgic. If readers were to concentrate only on what the protagonist doesn't know, on her halting attempts to make sense of biblical prophecy, the novel might seem an attempt to return to pre-modern mythologizing. After all, Lila needs Ames's explanation that the earth is closer to the moon than the sun, that “falling stars” are not really enormous gaseous spheres dying and falling to earth, but tiny

meteoroids burning up in the atmosphere. “She and Mellie had wondered about those things, why some stars came unstuck and the others didn’t, where they landed when they fell, whether all of them would fall down sometime, even the moon” (117). But Robinson is neither idealizing nor mocking Lila’s childlikeness. Instead, placing it in dialogue with Ames’s deeper formal education—but also his relative naiveté about worldly affairs—she allows each character to rescue the other. His education and patience lead her into greater wonder, even as her curiosity and practical wisdom lead him to rediscover incarnation, with all of its precariousness. This dynamic is especially apparent in his reflection on the doctrine of predestination. Treated abstractly in *Gilead*, the topic produces considerable angst in an exchange featuring Ames, old Boughton, Jack, Glory, and Lila. In the third novel, however, Ames’s more personal, narrational reflection is far more vivid. In a letter responding to Lila’s question regarding the meaning of existence, Ames writes:

A father holds out his hands to a child who is learning to walk, and he comforts the child with words and draws it toward him, but he lets the child feel the risk it is taking, and lets it choose its own courage and the certainty of love and comfort when he reaches his father over—I was going to say choose it over safety, but there is no safety. And there is no choice either, because it is in the nature of the child to walk. As it is to want the attention and encouragement of the father. And the promise of comfort. Which it is in the nature of the father to give. I feel it would be presumptuous of me to describe the ways of God. Those that are all we know of Him, when there is so much we don’t know. Though we are told to call Him Father. And I know I would be presumptuous to speak

as if the suffering that people feel as they pass through the world were not grave enough to make your question much more powerful than any answer I could offer. My faith tells me that God shared poverty, suffering, and death with human beings, which can only mean that such things are full of dignity and meaning, even though to believe this makes a great demand on one’s faith, and to act as if this were true in any way we understand is to be ridiculous. It is ridiculous also to act as if it were not absolutely and essentially true all the same. Even though we are to do everything we can to put an end to poverty and suffering. (76–77)

This reflection could yield its own essay, but I will emphasize only its overwhelming humility. “And I know I would be presumptuous to speak as if the suffering that people feel as they pass through the world were not grave enough to make your question much more powerful than any answer I could offer.” *Lila* returns briefly to the epistolary mode of *Gilead* in order to remind us that the man whom Lila is very slowly growing to trust and the man who later authors letters like this to their son are the same person, viewed at different moments in time, from various characters’ perspectives. His note to Lila provides no final answer to the paradox of predestination, no more so than the book of Job does to the problem of unjust suffering. But he openly admits this, which is its own reward: “I have struggled with this my whole life. I still have not answered your question, I know, but thank you for asking it. I may be learning something from the attempt” (77). Robinson is highlighting the fact that the relationships we know via *Gilead* and *Home* are the products of very real leaps in the dark. Lila did not know she was about to propose marriage any more than Ames did. These characters surprise themselves

and each other. As readers of Robinson's work are invited to recognize, Ames and Lila realize that "there is no safety"—the whirlwind of creation and the behemoths it produces leave little room for that—but there are still very real tastes of goodness, moments of rest, and glimpses of transcendence. No one can stop time and hold onto those good things indefinitely, not in this life. But in Robinson's fiction and nonfiction, there are many welcome oases, and they are most plentiful when faith, science, and social justice commingle.

To some, this argument may seem obvious. Perhaps it should. For the majority of my students, though, Robinson's integration of hopefulness, intellect, and action is shockingly foreign to their experience of Christianity. Are they so unusual? They come from a fairly wide array of religious backgrounds, at least considering their Midwestern context: plenty of evangelicals and mainline Protestants; but also a healthy smattering of Catholics; occasional Eastern Orthodox, Jewish, and Muslim students; and at least a handful of atheists. There is sometimes a refugee from Iraq sitting beside a military veteran who knows that country from a very different perspective; often there is a Latina student or two whose families—extended, if not immediate—await legal status. Perhaps my students' most universal characteristic is that nearly all work at least twenty hours per week, and some have childcare responsibilities as well. In short, these are not particularly privileged people, even if they live in one of the richest nations on earth, and they are far more likely to identify with Lila than with Ames. The Bible most often seems incredibly strange to them, not familiar. And that has profound implications for those of us who dare seek to emulate the main character of the Gospels. Robinson's novels, like her essays, are some of the most urgent invitations I know to place greater priority on integrating belief, knowledge, and social action. They are quiet, restrained, and even slow-moving, but they fairly burst with an appeal that heart, head, and hands must work together—or not at all. X

Notes

1 See Sharon Jebb Smith, "Serious Literature: 'Sullen We Lie Here Now,'" in *Visions and Revisions: The Word and the Text*, ed. Roger Kojecký and Andrew Tate (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 15–28.

2 In-text citations to Robinson's novels refer to *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004) and *Lila* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2014).

3 Marilynne Robinson, "Humanism," in *The Givenness of Things* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2015), 6.

4 Like Robinson, McGilchrist is critical of scientism and reductionism, and his work represents a welcome exception to the tendencies she criticizes. He argues that better understanding cognitive structure might illuminate humanity's relationship with the world and help counter

the widespread assumption in some quarters that there are [only] two alternatives: either things exist 'out there' and are unaltered by the machinery we use to dig them up, or to tear them apart . . . or they are subjective phenomena which we create out of our own minds, and therefore we are free to treat them in any way we wish, since they are after all, our own creations. (*The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* [New Haven: Yale, 2009], 4–5)

5 On Robinson's portrayal of the relationship between the earthly and the sacred, see especially Chad Wriglesworth's "Becoming a Creature of Artful Existence: Theological Perception and Ecological Design in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*," in *This Life, This World: New Essays on Marilynne Robinson's "Housekeeping," "Gilead" and "Home,"* ed. Jason W. Stevens (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015), 91–130. Also providing useful attention to Robinson's integration of these categories are Andrew C. Stout's "'A Little Willingness to See': Sacramental Vision in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*," *Religion and the Arts* 18 (2014): 571–90; and Michael Vander Weele's "Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and the Difficult Gift of Human Exchange," *Christianity and Literature* 59, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 217–39.

6 There is a telling gap in *Gilead* between Ames's determination to treat Jack fairly and his honest inability to do so without first admitting his struggles with "covetise." He begins one section, for instance, "Let me say first of all that the grace of God is sufficient to any transgression, and that to judge is wrong, the origin and essence of much error and cruelty" (155). Only pages later, he concludes, "That's all I think I need to tell you about Jack Boughton. . . . He doesn't have the look of a man who has made good use of himself, if I am any judge" (160). Robinson's testimony through Ames is that forgiveness must be *worked through*—that, taken seriously, it is not a choice made quickly or easily.

7 Marilynne Robinson, "Freedom of Thought," in *When I Was a Child I Read Books: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2012), 8, 9.

8 For another critical essay that emphasizes Robinson's defense of subjectivity in the face of "New Atheist" scientism, see Justin Evans, "Subjectivity and the Possibility of Change in Marilynne Robinson," *Renascence* 66, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 131–50.

9 Marilynne Robinson, "Darwinism," in *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 40.

10 Robinson, "Humanism," 11.

11 Christopher Douglas is one of several literary critics who have resisted this distinction, accusing Robinson's essays and particularly "Darwinism" of dishonesty about the definition of evolution and inattention to right-wing Christianity's domination of the last half-century of American politics ("Christian Multiculturalism and Unlearned History in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*," in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 44, no. 3 [2011]: 333–53). This is not the place for an extended response, but I will express the hope that Robinson's more recent essays (like "Humanism") may have clarified matters. My sense, in brief, is not that Robinson is glossing over the ugliness of contemporary fundamentalism—Ames's reference to his pastoral work already being undone by late-1950s

radio preachers suggests otherwise—but that she is most interested in cultivating healthier expressions of Christianity that join biology in taking material existence as seriously as it deserves.

12 Robinson, "Freedom of Thought," 11.

13 Robinson, "Humanism," 14.

14 Robinson, "Darwinism," 40.

15 *Ibid.*, 71.

16 One of the few critical treatments of Robinson's *Gilead* trilogy to comment on her concern with neo-liberal economics is Jeffrey Gonzalez's "Ontologies of Interdependence, the Sacred, and Health Care: Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*," *Critique* 55 (2014): 373–88.

17 Robinson, "Humanism," 4.

18 Another recent, highly recommended novel that very poignantly explores this conjunction is Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (New York: Harper, 2012). If I had to compare Lila with another character in contemporary literature, it might be Kingsolver's Dellarobia Turnbow, whose story of similarly humble origins suggests even more explicitly how rigorous science and thoughtful faith might be held together.